

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

Volume 4, Number 1, 1992-93

A publication of The Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org).

Power in College Teaching

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Power appears in many guises. It ebbs and flows, seen or unseen, beneath most teacher-student relationships. It may serve teaching purposes well, but it also may erode the best intentioned efforts.

Power in college teaching is a topic that has drawn the attention of faculty members for many years. We long to use it properly and effectively, and we worry about succumbing to its misuse and abuse. In conversations with colleagues about this subject, I find that we commonly think about power in its two more obvious senses. The first of these is *maintaining control in the classroom* - that is, being able to run through our agenda or accomplish our goals without distraction or disruption, maintaining the authority that derives from our knowledge and position.

The second sense in which we commonly think about power is *avoiding the abuses of power*. Generally, this involves a compendium of commandments, often unwritten, yet in large part understood and accepted. Among such dicta are: Thou shalt not be arbitrary. Thou shalt not ridicule or hassle students. Thou shalt not use students for thy personal gain. Thou shalt not do power trips. I don't mean to downplay such injunctions. Of course it's important to treat students with dignity and respect. We all discourage abuse, and we condemn violations, whether major or minor.

And of course it's important to stay on educational track and to maintain reasonable classroom decorum. It's part of our implied contract with students to use class time wisely for learning purposes.

But over the years, I've found that the issue of power in teaching is much more complex than this. Power is an undercurrent that ebbs and flows beneath most of our activities and relationships with students. It may support and reinforce our teaching purposes, but it also may erode some of our best intentioned efforts. It may surface quickly and unexpectedly. And it may lurk in hidden pools and quagmires, waiting for the unwary to misstep.

Power appears in many guises. And it's unseen or unrecognized power that may be the most troublesome for teachers.

Power is often perceived differently by teachers and students. There is no question that power is available to teachers. We are endowed with power by our disciplines and by the structure of our institutions. Yet, many teachers choose not to overtly exercise this power, preferring to accomplish their missions through the less obvious means of encouragement, motivation, example, reason, and persuasion. For many, having to resort to power --- for example, using the threat of a grade to obtain compliance with requests or speaking sharply to quiet a disturbing student --- represents a breakdown of other strategies. Those of us who are of this mind continually explore alternatives and ask ourselves if we have exhausted all reasonable options before we succumb to employing raw power to achieve our purposes in the classroom.

In reality, we may not have as much choice as we think. Many students in our classes, whether by virtue of their previous educational conditioning or their concept of the roles of student and teacher, perceive us as powerful. If students endow us with power, we are powerful, and that will be reflected in their relationships with us, no matter what attempts we may make to lower our power profiles. Here's an example of such a situation. A student is conferring with me about a subject for a term paper. I try to be helpful and suggest several alternatives in the interest of narrowing the topic to a manageable size. But he takes each suggestion in turn as a mandate, and finally he presses me to identify the best one. I reply that it's his choice. He leaves my office confused and upset because I did not tell him what to write about.

So, when students grant us more power than we choose to exercise,

problems can develop. There is another side to this issue: Some students may grant us less power than we may need to exercise in order to fulfill our teaching responsibilities. These students may resist meeting the requirements of a course or may meet them grudgingly or barely within the letter of the syllabus. They may even try to defeat the objectives of the course through less than honorable means.

Of course, we are likely to have both kinds of students in any given course, with many shadings between the extremes. Furthermore, students' perceptions are likely to be in a continual state of flux. And we teachers may vary our exercise of power according to the subject matter, as well as to where we are in a course. Whenever there is a disparity between students' perception of a teacher's power and the teacher's own perception and employment of power, tension will result --- often to the detriment of accomplishing learning goals. With such a fluid situation, it's no wonder that it's easy for us to become enveloped by the flash floods and quicksands of power.

In almost every situation in which power surfaces, decisions are judgment calls. There seem to be no uniform rules that can be applied with high assurance of success. In my own teaching, I try to cope by seeking answers to some key questions:

How can I make abundantly clear to students my goals and expectations?

How can I assess students' perceptions of my power?

Can I (and should I) adjust to the disparity in power perceptions?

How can I affect students' perceptions of my power in order to bring them closer to the level that I feel is appropriate for me to exercise?

What level of power is appropriate for me to exercise?

Power is inherent in promoting change and learning. Education is a process of change, change in students. Teachers are agents of that change. With but few exceptions, we impinge on students --- sometimes subtly, sometimes intensely. We challenge students. To some of them, however, the process can be discomfoting, and they may perceive it as threatening to their well-being and perhaps even a downright violation of their person. Yet, the process of education almost always involves a teacher exercising power over a student in some way.

Suppose that I try to engage students actively in the learning process by setting up a simulation in which they play assigned roles. Some are developers, some are financiers; some are politicians, and some are concerned citizens; together they are to hammer out a community's policy on growth. It might work well as an educational exercise. Or it might struggle because some students may refuse to play roles that they feel are in violation of their personal principles; some may react against having to reveal their emotions and values; and some may protest that they are in class to learn from the teacher and pass tests, not to play Mickey-Mouse games.

Or suppose I try to get students to prepare for ethical decisions they'll face in their chosen careers. Since ethical decisions derive from personal values, I devise classroom activities designed to get students to understand their personal values --- and perhaps even to modify them, if they choose. But two weeks later, a delegation of my students calls on the dean to protest that I'm meddling with their personal lives instead of teaching the subject matter; they say they would have dropped the course if they had known in time that it was going to be like this. I point out to the dean that I've been very careful to disclose up-front what I expect from students, but I'm not sure my arguments convince her.

In both cases, I've directed my power as a teacher legitimately (I think) toward educational goals, but some students think I'm using power improperly. If I try to engage students in stimulating dialogue, some of them may feel inappropriately imposed upon. Some may defer, accepting my arguments as gospel and declining to uphold their own beliefs. Those at relativist stages of development will react differently from the dualists (to use Perry's schema for levels of development in the college years) and differently yet from the few who may be at a commitment stage. Even in everyday discussions, women tend to respond differently from men. When I choose to assume a particular position for purposes of discussion, I'm never sure that all my students understand that I'm playing a role (despite the bright red *Devil's Advocate* T-shirt I sometimes wear to signal my temporary change in character). And I've found that using satire runs a great risk of total misinterpretation.

Indeed, teaching is an intrusive activity. It's easy for aggressive educational postures to cross over into an adversarial relationship. It's easy for exercise of influence to be interpreted as manipulation. It's easy for requests, challenges, and demands to intrude too far on the persons of students. Even a modest display of power can lead to procedural dilemmas, not to mention the possibility of ethical transgressions.

But unless we are content to be bloodless pedagogues, carrying the title of Teacher in name only, we will have to take some risks. Taking risks knowingly does not mean that we should take them recklessly, however. We must constantly monitor our teaching activities. For myself, I do that by asking more questions:

How can I be more perceptive to students' reactions and perceptions?

Am I dealing with students as individuals insofar as possible?

In challenging situations, do I leave students a sufficient out without providing a too easy cop-out?

Have my disclosures of the course processes been thorough enough to give students every chance of avoiding situations that really might violate their principles?

Have I shared and discussed with students my concept of my role as teacher, philosophy of learning, and view of power?

Aside from the significant impact on the formal education of students there is another important aspect involved in how teachers manage the power relationship: the model of power and its exercise that we portray. If we wish our students to become persons who use power wisely in their lives, let them see that quality in us.

Perhaps it's how teachers conceive of power that makes the ultimate difference. Consider this statement by Peter G. Beidler, Professor of English at Lehigh University and CASE Professor-of-the-Year in 1983, in an essay in which he enumerates the reasons why he chose to become a teacher:

And I have power. I have the power to nudge, to fan sparks, to ask troubling questions, to praise an attempted answer, to condemn hiding from the truth, to suggest books, to point out a pathway.

What other power matters?

Many of us share this viewpoint. That positive and wise use of power to advance learning, to change lives for the better, to affect eternity through our students, is what makes teaching such a noble --- and yes, *powerful* --- enterprise.